

# H-Net Reviews

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**Kirsten McKenzie.** *Imperial Underworld: An Escaped Convict and the Transformation of the British Colonial Order.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 330 pp. \$34.99 (paper), ISBN 978-1-107-68679-3.

**Reviewed by** Oliver Charbonneau (University of Western Ontario)

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**Commissioned by** Charles V. Reed (Elizabeth City State University)

In his study of policing and surveillance in the colonial Philippines, Alfred McCoy identifies what he calls a “covert netherworld ... a murky realm between the formal and informal, licit and illicit” where power is negotiated among a shifting cast of characters all looking to further their own nebulous ends.[1] This reading sees colonial institutional prerogatives channeled through a raucous interplay of myriad oppositions: high and low culture; personal liberty and elite control; an untethered press and state authority; free and unfree labor. As contradictory spaces where proto-democratic experiments developed alongside racial stratification and extreme coercion, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century overseas colonies provide a wealth of material for researchers probing the liminal and unseemly. Work on Africa, Latin America, and South Asia from the past two decades attests to this observation.[2] The topic dovetails nicely with an increased scholarly focus on how people and knowledge traveled through different sites within and between empires, and the practical ramifications of these transmissions. Kirsten McKenzie, associate professor of history at the University of Sydney, builds upon many of these themes (as well as her previous writings) in *Imperial Underworld*, a wide-ranging study of scandal and reform in New South Wales and the Cape Colony.

*Imperial Underworld* is framed by the final decade of its central character, a man variously known as Alexander Loe Kaye and William Edwards. Contributing to a growing scholarly interest in transnational biography, McKenzie traces Edwards’s chameleonic existence across three continents. Underpinning his experiences as a twice-transported convict and colonial rabble-rouser in

the Cape Colony is *Imperial Underworld*’s study of interconnected transitions and reconfigurations in the British Empire’s South African and Antipodean possessions during the 1820s. Integrating local scandal and interpersonal relations into histories of imperial law and governance, McKenzie demonstrates how reform in these colonial societies was often the product of muddy and unpredictable social dynamics. Set against the backdrop of the parliamentary Commissions of Inquiry, the book’s eight chapters tackle an admirable range of topics, including the bureaucratization of the Colonial Office; surveillance, information gathering, and press freedoms in the colonies; the role of emancipated slaves and unfree labor in the Cape Colony; the legal particularities of and debates over convict transportation; and the overlooked centrality of gossip and relational networks in imperial reform. These topics all contribute to McKenzie’s broader concern with the contributions of “ostensibly marginal figures” in developing and delimiting a “specifically British idea of imperial power” during a transformational period (p. 24).

Chapter 1 provides a biographical sketch of Alexander Loe Kaye prior to his entanglement in the Cape Colony’s thorny politics. Kaye dabbled in banking, property speculation, and law in his early life—the last of which he returned to repeatedly during his time in the colonies. Unsuccessful in his professional endeavors and often at odds with his family, Kaye ran afoul of English authorities multiple times in his late twenties. This culminated with an 1819 conviction for horse theft that saw him transported to New South Wales. He escaped from his penal servitude in 1821 (possibly to Java), an act McKenzie situates alongside Clare Anderson’s work

on convict lives in the nineteenth-century Indian Ocean world.[3] The latter half of the chapter surveys the political and social conditions of the Cape Colony and New South Wales in the 1820s, placing the territories Edwards operated within in comparative (and connected) context. In the former, McKenzie parses the tension between the waning autocratic powers of Governor Charles Somerset and the drive for “greater probity in administrative practice” represented by John Thomas Bigge and the Commission of Eastern Inquiry (p. 46). The eastern Australian possessions presented their own challenges as penal settlements forged by struggles between convict “emancipists” and free settlers over whose rights took precedence in the colony. Although New South Wales was markedly different from the Cape Colony in its legal structures and history, the chapter concludes by linking the two spaces through a “shift in thinking on imperial governance” at the time (p. 59). This metropolitan preoccupation with the “Old Corruption” represented by aristocrats like Somerset gave the grandstanding actions of men like William Edwards a lasting import they otherwise may not have had.

The following two chapters analyze the impact of informal communications networks, intelligence gathering, and proto-populism on metropole-colony interactions. Chapter 2 is a fascinating study of the Colonial Office undersecretary of state Henry Bathurst and the role of “reputation management and and political spin in the mechanics of imperial policy change” (p. 62). McKenzie describes a “dual-system of administration” devised to placate parliamentary critics, wherein obliging private correspondence tempered the strict diktats contained in official messages. In this second tier of correspondence, Bathurst and his undersecretaries could massage the egos of men like Somerset while devising strategies for keeping colonial outrages away from open scrutiny in the House of Commons (and, by extension, the public eye). The system was a “carefully choreographed dance,” meant to placate and protect upper-class proconsuls from Whig and Radical criticism while also incrementally professionalizing colonial governance structures. Chapter 3 begins with an 1823 incident in which William Edwards was inaccurately identified as government spy George Edwards, famous for his involvement in the 1820 “Cato Street conspiracy” and emblematic of government perfidy in the paranoid public imagination of the time. Edwards (the former), now a notary in the Cape Colony, took the matter to court to defend his reputation and further establish his manufactured biography. McKenzie places the episode within a

broader hysteria around spies and agent provocateurs in Great Britain, typified in popular pamphlets like *Spies and Bloodites!!!*. As was common practice, both the Somerset administration and Commissions of Inquiry used clandestine channels to gather information. The atmosphere of public suspicion surrounding these practices, alongside competing local and metropolitan power structures, helped Edwards’s later claims carry greater weight in the press and government circles.

Chapters 4 and 5 examine the British Empire’s shadowy “prize slave” system. Intended as a bridge between chattel slavery and emancipation, the system “apprenticed” ostensibly freed slaves to prominent landholders and businessmen for up to fourteen years. In the Cape Colony, two customs officials, Charles Blair and William Wilberforce Bird, controlled the trafficking of these “liberated” Africans, using them to build impressive patronage networks, ameliorate personal debt, and offset labor shortages in the colony. A minor run-in between Blair and a local merchant named Lancelot Cooke over the distribution of the slaves, and the merchant’s subsequent hiring of William Edwards to lodge a complaint, snowballed into a public debate over whether the entire set-up was merely a “scheme to seize slaves bound for the colonies of rival powers in order to misuse them in British ones” (p. 109). Although premised on a vulgar outburst by Blair, the Cooke-Edwards missive reached authorities in London and shed greater light the intimate relationship between public office and private gain. Thus, McKenzie argues, a matter of personal honor became “the unexpected catalyst that exposed the prize slave system to official scrutiny” and raised deeper questions about Great Britain’s status as an abolitionist nation. Chapter 5 unpacks the 1824 criminal libel trial resulting from the Cooke-Edwards memorial through the lens of colonial honor culture. Cooke and Edwards vociferously defended themselves by claiming they acted in the public interest by exposing official corruption, while Blair framed his actions as those of a diligent government agent protecting rescued slaves. Both sides grounded their arguments in white supremacist notions of paternal responsibility for lesser peoples. Especially interesting is the chapter’s examination of Edwards’s courtroom performance, which marshalled support by placing British national virtue (via abolitionism) against the actions of “corrupt officials who had made common cause with the ‘revolutionary Horde’ of the Cape Dutch” (p. 158).

William Edwards’s moment of triumph over the Somerset administration proved brief. Identified as the author of two incendiary letters to the governor in April

1824, a mere month after his acquittal, Edwards once more found himself in hot water. On this occasion, matters of gubernatorial power, colonial legal structures, and press freedom came to the fore. Chapter 6 deconstructs Edwards's grandstanding self-defense during his second libel trial, where he at once denied authorship of the letters to Somerset and defended their contents. McKenzie claims Edwards's trials were part of a "wider crisis in legal pluralism"—namely, the overlap and friction between Roman-Dutch and English law (p. 166). On legal matters, the Cape Colony administration had a hybridic quality, often referring to preexisting Dutch procedures and precedents. This ran up against the protestations of those being tried under the system, the English-language press, and metropolitan officials. Edwards and his press supporters promoted the notion that "freeborn Englishmen" were being stripped of their constitutional rights in the colonies in favor of "despotic Dutch law" (pp. 181-183). The notary's conviction and subsequent transportation to New South Wales set the scene for chapter 7, which delves into the shuttering of the *South African Commercial Advertiser* newspaper and Somerset's executive order to remove Edwards. The latter act was "steeped in the practices of a previous colonial regime" and gives McKenzie pause to reflect on how a disparate array of British officials drew from other legal traditions (p. 197). The larger topic here—what is kept and what is discarded when one colonial power replaces another—is important and often overlooked in the study of empires.[4] Although the Colonial Office and Commission of Eastern Inquiry ultimately upheld Somerset's decision, the contentious public nature of the dispute led to the appointment of an advisory council to help settle such issues. Supposedly local affairs like the second Edwards trial, the book argues, helped "tip the balance towards a more powerful articulation not just of British sovereignty but also of British law over a variety of colonial domains across the nineteenth century" (p. 211).

Edwards's ability to generate controversy and debate continued unabated even after his incarceration, transportation, and death. Chapter 8 centers upon a scandal that broke out while Edwards languished in jail—one that he was (predictably) implicated in. In early June 1824, a placard posted on the streets of Cape Town accused Governor Somerset of a homosexual affair with one of his confidantes, a physician named James Barry. The chapter briefly ponders questions surrounding Dr. Barry's indeterminate sex (an engaging topic in its own right), but is more concerned with examining the "political management" of the scandal (p. 225). Squandering

public sympathy generated by the salacious attack, the Somerset administration used the placard affair as means to further discredit its critics. This approach backfired, instead playing into the paranoia surrounding government surveillance of and espionage against private citizens. "By offering large rewards in their attempt to flush out the alleged perpetrators and by relying on testimony gained in dubious circumstances by marginal members of Cape society," McKenzie writes, "the administration mired itself in accusations of spying" (p. 244). *Imperial Underworld's* final chapter returns Edwards to New South Wales, where he vexed authorities once more by contesting his identification as Alexander Loe Kaye and leveling claims of tyranny against Governor Ralph Darling. Officials in London continued pondering the legal legitimacy of Edwards's conviction and transportation even after his death by suicide in 1828, and the apparent medical dissection of his body (to biologically link his two identities) created a press row in Sydney.

Analyzing any single life against the backdrop of imperial transition is difficult business. This is doubly true as it relates to a character like William Edwards, whose shifting identity and evasive interior life resist simplistic conclusions. McKenzie acknowledges as much, and adeptly shows how the messy uncertainties and questionable motives of a unique anticorruption warrior like Edwards moved the dial on wider reform efforts across the empire. The task is admirable for its difficulty—the unstable rogue-as-reformer is a harder figure to place than, say, a conventional humanitarian activist. Fortunately for the reader, *Imperial Underworld* confidently balances its narrative and analytic registers. The jump between the incestuous social world of Cape Town and interimperial debates over prisoner transportation, for instance, is not nearly as disorienting as it might be in less-skilled hands. Filled with peculiar crimes, obscene placards, outrageous slanders, and even some abysmal love poetry, the book is also genuinely amusing considering its primary function as a serious work on imperial reform. All of this amiable detail backgrounds illuminating and wide-ranging discussions on the commissions of inquiry, colonial honor culture, slavery and abolitionism, and legal pluralism, among other topics. McKenzie draws these insights from a multi-archival trove of primary-source documentation.

*Imperial Underworld* covers much ground and generally does so exceptionally well. Writing connected histories with obscure biography as one's vehicle is challenging even for an established scholar. While there is an occasional road not taken here—I would have, for in-

stance, appreciated more information on how other European empires factored into or influenced the controversies covered—overall the book is narratively well balanced and analytically precise. In using the labyrinthine life of William Edwards as an entry point to explore lesser-known aspects of colonial policymaking, Kirsten McKenzie makes a valuable contribution to scholarly discussions on the unwieldy nature of reform, the role of scandal in colonial societies, and the negotiated qualities of rule between colony and metropole.

#### Notes

[1]. Alfred W. McCoy, *Policing America's Empire: The United States, the Philippines, and the Rise of the Surveillance State* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 47.

[2]. On scandals, reform, and colonial rule, see James Epstein, *Scandal of Colonial Rule: Power and Subversion in the British Atlantic During the Age of Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Anin-

dita Ghosh, *Claiming the City: Protest, Crime, and Scandals in Colonial Calcutta, c. 1860-1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Lyman L. Johnson and Sonya Lipsett-Rivera, *The Faces of Honor: Sex, Shame, and Violence in Colonial Latin America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998); Michael Salman, *The Embarrassment of Slavery: Controversies Over Bondage and Nationalism in the American Colonial Philippines* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); and Heike I. Schmidt, "Colonial Intimacy: The Rechenberg Scandal and Homosexuality in German East Africa," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 17, no. 1 (2008): 25-59.

[3]. Clare Anderson, *Subaltern Lives: Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean World, 1790-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1-23.

[4]. The most recent collection focusing on exchange (albeit from a later era) is Volker Barth and Roland Cvetkovski, eds., *Imperial Co-operation and Transfer, 1870-1930* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

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